DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 434 HE 020 338

AUTHOR Muir, William R.
TITLE The Structure of the Academic Dogma: Ancient History Is Not Just Academic. ASHE 1987 Annual Meeting Paper.
PUB DATE Feb 87
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (San Diego, CA, February 13-17, 1987). Light type may not reproduce.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; Higher Education; *Interprofessional Relationship; Organizational Theories; Peer Influence; *Socialization; *Social Theories; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting

ABSTRACT

The influence of the academic culture that academics learn from mentors and senior colleagues is considered, with attention to the socialization process, social learning theory, and the psychology of awareness. The nature of deliberation and decision-making in a typical college or university and the issue of whether the university operates on a rational basis are addressed. The academic culture contains a number of implicit rules that will govern the academic's perception of what is appropriate behavior in an academic setting (academic dogma or theory-in-use). The academic may be unaware of the influence of the culture on his or her behavior. The culture also contains explicitly stated rules open to conscious scrutiny (academic rhetoric or espoused theory), which may or may not coincide with the implicit rules that actually affect behavior. It is suggested that it is an oversimplification to describe the university as a rationally operated institution. Its functional policies have a tendency to be unarticulated and inconsistent, and to be masked by a facade of rhetoric. Much of this conflict arises from the different historical roots of the various elements of the academic dogma. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED281434

The Structure of The Academic Dogma: Ancient History Is Not Just Academic

William R. Muir
University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

WILLIAM R. MUIR

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education
17 February 1987, San Diego, CA.

HE020 338

ASHE
ASSOCIATION
FOR THE
STUDY OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

The George Washington
University
One Dupont Circle, Suite 630
Washington, D.C. 20036-1183
(202) 296-2597

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the San Diego Hilton in San Diego, California, February 14-17, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

An examination of the research literature of higher education reveals that the majority of it rests on a number of assumptions concerning the nature of academics' thinking and behavior. These assumptions are not peculiar to the study of educational institutions; they are general beliefs about people's mental processes that are part of our Western cultural heritage. However, presumably because higher education represents rationality and intellectuality in its ultimate forms, these beliefs seem to be held particularly intensely in the academic context.

These assumptions can be approximately summarized by three propositions. First, it is commonly assumed that what we do is, on the whole, rational; our actions are chosen with regard to their predictable consequences, and to the extent that we may apparently act inconsistently we do so only because of imperfect information on which to base decisions. Second, the cognitive processes by which we choose our goals, and decide on the best way in which to achieve them, are available to introspective analysis, so that we are able to understand our own thinking and can, if we so choose, describe it to others. Finally, the influences of past events on our actions, both those happenings which we have experienced personally and those which we are aware of only through other peoples' descriptions, are of the same nature as the effects present events have upon us. In making decisions, our knowledge of

the past, our assessments of the present, and our predictions of the future all contribute the same sort of information to what is essentially an intellectual process; there is no distinction made between these inputs on the basis of their time frame.

Although we may occasionally give serious consideration to proposals that are exceptions to these generalizations, such as Freudian theories of unconscious motives, on the whole we seldom seem to doubt their validity. These assumptions have had two important effects on how research is typically carried out on issues in higher education. First, by assuming that the actors involved behave reasonably, consciously taking into account the information available to them in making decisions, we tend to conclude that we can accurately and economically increase our understanding about academics' goals, beliefs, and plans simply by directly asking them the right questions. Although we may sometimes be led astray by errors in our research methodology, or by our respondents having been misinformed or, for some reasons best known to them, deliberately misleading us, we feel that these problems can eventually be remedied by consulting other sources of information. Second, if these beliefs are really correct, then the practical value of the study of the history of higher education is limited. If present events are caused only by present conditions, then they are best understood by examining what is happening today.

Although yesterday may influence today's events, the effects of past history on people's present behavior are mediated by their current knowledge of those past events and the degree to which they consider those events to be still important. As the information about the past that is operative at the present moment can be learned by simply asking people today what they believe, and as what <u>really</u> did happen at any point in the past can be quite difficult to ascertain, and as it is of only academic interest anyway if nobody today was previously aware of it, why bother?.

Very few authors of works on the history of higher education have, to my knowledge, justified them with anything resembling a confident (or even definite) statement on the practical value of such studies. Two recent articles that are exceptions to this generalization (Blackburn and Conrad, 1986; Mayhew, 1986) seem to imply that history has pragmatic worth because patterns of events repeat themselves over time, so that historical hindsight can inform future problem-solving. By contrast, I would like to explore the proposition that the study of the history of higher education is of practical value because the previously described assumptions are, if not incorrect, at best oversimplications of a complex situation, and that in fact a knowledge of past events may provide an understanding of developments that is more difficult to arrive at through an analysis of our contemporary perceptions of them than we care to believe. The

conclusions that I propose are not new, and I will review the work of previous writers who have discussed them earlier. I will also outline some research in psychology and the social sciences whose findings provide a certain amount of empirical support for what, until recently, has been largely theoretical speculation.

The conclusions that I suggest in this paper can be summarized by two statements. First, academics' habitual behavior and day-to-day decisions reflect more than rational analysis. They are governed as well by what amounts to a traditional culture, briefly and tentatively defined as the source of a family of related concepts such as symbols, ideology, beliefs, and myths (Pettigrew, 1979). This culture gives its members a set of positive and negative values for their goals, establishes conceptual categories that govern their perception of events, and provides a set of rules on how to behave correctly in various circumstances. Although this culture can be modified by contemporary developments, some elements of it are of considerable antiquity.

Second, this culture operates on two levels, one explicit and the other implicit. The principles that actually shape academics' behavior are not always available to their conscious scrutiny, so that they are often unable to describe the cognitive processes that have led them to take a particular action or to predict accurately how they might react in some future situation. What they do describe

on the basis of introspective analysis is essentially a rationalization of the processes actually governing their behavior. Although the explicit introspective descriptions of the cognitive processes and the implicit behavioral principles are not completely unrelated, not infrequently there are considerable discrepancies between the two.

In the remainder of the paper I will briefly examine the nature of the academic profession, and the process of socialization into it. I will review an area of psychology known as Social Learning Theory and its possible relevance to academic socialization. I will summarize the observations of a number of writers on the nature of academic culture, and then describe some research that casts doubt on some of our common beliefs on the role of introspection in cognitive processes. Finally, I will suggest some conclusions based on this review.

The Nature of the Academic Profession

The university (which I will treat as being virtually isomorphic with the academic profession) is recognized as one of the most stable institutions of Western civilization. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education has observed that there are some 66 Western institutions that still exist today in the same recognizable form they had in 1530: the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man, and 62 universities. "Universities in the past have been remarkable for their historical continuity,

and we may expect this same characteristic in the future. They have experienced wars, revolutions, depressions, and industrial transformations, and have come out less changed than almost any other segment of their societies (Carnegie Council, 1980, p.9n)."

This resistance to change can be attributed, at least in part, to the way that faculty are typically recruited and socialized. One of the functions of the university is the training of a large number of students during a brief period in their lives, after which most of them leave and pursue a career in the outside world. A small minority of students, however, elect not to leave the institution but to make their career within it. Something about their initial academic experience persuades them to attempt to become faculty members themselves, and to accomplish this they undergo further specialized education and seek probationary appointments, hoping to ultimately gain tenured positions. This will typically take ten to fifteen years of the early period of their lives, during which time they must not only successfully learn the formal cognitive abilities tested by examinations and thesis defenses, but they will also have to survive the informal screening processes required to gain adequate letters of reference and recommendations from tenure committees, among other vital criteria of the less tangible attributes of competent academics. Nor will these informal assessments represent a rite of passage experienced only once: they will continue

to function as discriminants between success and mere survival to the end of the academic career through such filters as grant and promotion committees. What is the nature of the knowledge that distinguishes the skilled academic from the mediocre, and how is it learned? An area of psychology known as Social Learning Theory provides some suggestions as to how this acquisition takes place. I will review this topic in the next section, following which I will discuss the nature of what is learned.

Social Learning Theory

The function of "mentorship" in facilitating the informal learning of academic survival skills has received some attention, although woefully little (e.g., Querault, 1982; Reohr, 1981). A mentor is an older, more experienced person who expresses a kindly, protective, parental interest in a neophyte and provides advice, encouragement, and patronage; academics who report receiving the benefits of mentorship typically are more successful professionally than those who do not. However, mentorships, as exemplified by a cherished personal relationship between a graduate student and a thesis advisor, must merely represent in a particularly dramatic fashion the tip of the iceberg of a wide variety of potential examples of learning by imitation of models. Graduate students and junior faculty have many opportunities to observe successful older faculty other than thesis supervisors, and a mentor-protege relationship is not necessary for their examples to be

followed. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1962, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963) describes the importance of the role of observing others in learning many of the complex behaviors we acquire in everyday life, in addition to the effects of practice and reward. Consider the examples of learning to speak a foreign language, to drive a car, and to smoke a cigarette; it is difficult to conceive of anyone achieving these skills solely through trial-and-error learning, or from reading books. The instance of smoking is a particularly relevant illustration of this point, as it represents a learning process that seems explainable almost completely through observing models, and one not to be expected as a result of formal instruction and personal gratification (not initially, at least).

In a recent review of studies of learning through imitation Mazur (1986) has found it involved in complex behaviors and emotional reactions ranging from altruistic and aggressive responses to alcoholisms, phobias, and suicide. Particularly significant to the case of the neophyte academic were a number of controlled laboratory experiments on the effects of some characteristics of the imitated model, of the learner, and of the learning situation. Imitation was more likely to occur to a model who was perceived as nurturant, powerful, or dominant than of one who was not. Learners imitated more who were unconfident of their abilities and low in self-esteem. Imitation was increased by the uncertainty of the situation

and the difficulty of an assigned task. In short, many of the conditions that traditionally are the lot of the apprentice academic have been shown to be conducive to producing learning through imitation.

In attempting to explain why academics are as they are, consideration must be given to the possibility that the academic life might be particularly attractive to individuals with certain personality characteristics, so that faculty with a given initial bias might be more likely to be recruited. If a learning hypothesis is considered instead, perhaps the information that is passed on by a mentor to a protege is capable of being expressed verbally or in writing, and so is transmitted through the medium of language much like other academic skills. However, the theory and evidence reviewed here render quite plausible the hypothesis that to a considerable degree younger academics can learn behavior and attitudes directly by imitating the actions of their elders. Notice that what is learned need not be mediated by verbal or other symbolic represention; it could be learned without being described. Nor is what is learned necessarily of a socially desirable nature; modelling can be the basis of the acquisition of antisocial tendencies such as aggression, and self-destructive ones such as phobias and addictions. It is entirely possible that patterns of behavior and thought could be passed down through succeeding generations of academics virtually without modification. In a later

section I will explore the possibility that this learning might occur in the absence of conscious awarenesss by the learner as to what is being acquired. First, however, I will review some suggestions about what the content of the learning is. It has been argued that it constitutes a complex culture, with both conscious and unconscious elements.

Academic Culture

How does one best represent the nature of deliberation and decision-making in a typical college or university (if such institutions exist)? The question has been debated at length elsewhere, and I doubt if it would be possible to provide a definitive answer, even if I were able to ignore the space limitations of a paper such as this. Under the circumstances, the best that I can do is to provide a sampling of what I consider informed opinion on the topic.

On the issue of whether the university operates on a rational basis, Sproule, Weiner and Wolf (1968) provide a terse assessment: "Some of the most interesting and socially productive institutions in our society--for example, universities--have more in common with organized anarchies than with rational organizations. However, if the managers in these organizations believe in and act on the basis of a rational model, complications will surely arise." Wegener expands on this topic, remarking that in the academic world

> there is a radical diversity of intellectual modes....Much of this diversity, of course, remains unarticulated, but it is implicit in the activities of individuals and tends to emerge, usually unidentified, in controversy and in basic difficulties of communication and interaction. From the point of view of any developed philosophical position, the intellectual world in this functional sense is likely to appear an anarchy constituting a community only in some external, institutional sense wherein differences are papered over by inadequate rhetorics....And, most maddening of all to the philosophical mind, the members of this community seem not only indifferent but actively hostile to the demand that they reflect upon what they are doing and articulate its generic structuere. Less maddening, but discouraging, is the ineptitude and naivete they display when they attempt reflection. (Wegener, 1978, 66-7).

Wegener's contention that the university's operating philosophy is conflicting and unarticulated, and that it is "papered over by inadequate rhetorics," is consistent with Argyris' hypothesis of the distinction between "theory-in use," the rules which govern a person's actual behavior, and "espoused theory," "the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility of the two theories." (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 7). Argyris' "espoused theory" corresponds to Wegener's "rhetoric," and his "theory-in-use" to Robert Nisbet's (1971) "academic dogma," a set of beliefs "widely regarded as a good or right without necessity of constant scrutiny."

Is there some conceptual framework that can adequately contain a set of beliefs and plans for action such as those alluded to above? The report of the Study Commission appointed to recommend action to prevent a recurrance of the crisis that disrupted Berkeley in the sixties makes a suggestion:

> The phrase "university governance" conjures up a kaleidoscope of images of Regents, a president, a chancellor, vice-chancellors, special assistants, deans, chairmen, a faculty senate, and a student government; it also suggests a congeries of intricate relationships dotted by crucial points of authority and decision-making. This complexity offers a salutary warning against the common assumption that a system of university governance is a simple instrumentality or tool designed to serve the institution's goal of education. It is more enlightening to think of governance as a complex set of relations, powers, and influences embedded in a broader, more general campus "culture".... By a campus culture we mean that set of tacit assumptions about what is important that leads the members to ask not what is the letter of the law or the perogative of status and authority, but what is appropriate to an institution concerned with the cultivation of the mind and spirit. (Foote, Mayer, & Associates, 1968, 3, 17. Order not the same as original.)

Where do the various elements of this culture originate? In Clark Kerr's opinion, "the models of Oxford and Berlin and modern Harvard all animate segments of what was once a 'community of masters and students' with a single vision of its nature and purpose. These several competing visions of true purpose, each relating to a different layer of history, cause much of the malaise in the university communities of today." (1982, 8).

To summarize the message contained in this diverse set of quotations, it is suggested that it is an oversimplication to describe the university as a rationally operated institution. Its functional policies have a tendency to be unarticulated and inconsistent, and to be masked by a facade of rhetoric. Much of this conflict arises from the different historical roots of the various elements of the academic dogma.

Put as bluntly as this, such conclusions are resisted by many academics. How could an institution that is the high temple of rationality possibly be in such a paradoxical state of disorder? If such statements are true, why is this reality not obvious to those most intimately connected with the institution's activities? Strange though this situation may seem, there is a body of psychological research that suggests that our ability to be aware of some of our thought processes is not what we might think it is.

The Psychology of Awareness

In 1977 Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson published a review article on experimentation concerning people's ability to report on their mental processes. They concluded that it has been established long ago that introspective access to the details of the functioning of most perceptual and memory processes was lacking; although we may accurately judge distance on the basis of a complex set of information such as the appearance of apparently

converging parallel lines and atmospheric blurring, or we can retrieve a fact from long-term memory in response to a question, we are only aware of the end products of these mental operations, not of the mechanisms that produced them. Nisbett and Wilson went a step further, however, and examined subjects' reports from experiments in a number of areas such as learning, problem-solving, subliminal perception, and social psychology. After reviewing the previous literature they performed a number of additional experiments where they felt some of the conclusions might have been objected to because of unusual or atypical conditions in the original studies. One particularly dramatic finding came from a study where subjects' opinions were assessed on an issue and then were manipulated by a persuavive technique. Not only did the technique succeed in changing the subjects' opinions, but they subsequently claimed that they had never believed anything to the contrary; the persuasion process, they said, had merely "broadened their awareness of the issues." It was concluded that "the accuracy of subjective reports is so poor as to suggest that any introspective access that may exist is not sufficient to produce generally correct or reliable reports" when subjects were asked to describe "the effects of particular stimuli on higher-order, inference-based responses. Indeed, sometimes they cannot report on the existence of critical stimuli, sometimes cannot report on the existence of their responses, and sometimes cannot

even report that an inferential process of any kind had occurred." (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, 233).This is not to say that subjects were unable to offer reports, or even that their reports were invariably wrong. Nisbett and Wilson concluded that in the absence of actual access to the cognitive processes that produced responses, subjects' introspection represented the application of implicit, a priori theories about the causal connection between a stimulus and a response under given circumstances. The subjective reports sometimes correctly reflected the relationship between stimulus and response, not because of genuine introspective awareness, but because the predictive theory applied coincidentally happened to be correct. These causal theories as to the workings of cognitive processes, Nisbett and Wilson suggest, are provided to subjects by the culture or subculture they are members of.

Not surprisingly, this article has been subject to considerable criticism. However, the bulk of this criticism has concerned the question of whether the subjects' reports would have been so inaccurate if special experimental conditions had been established to maximise their accuracy. The conclusion that retrospective recollection of the mental processes underlying complex events in everyday circumstances is generally poor does not seem to have been seriously questioned.

In a previous section it was suggested that humans can learn through observing the behavior of models. A

particular instance of this process is learning the grammatical rules of one's native language; typically, the learner by observing and copying instances of others' speech will acquire the ability to detect examples of ungrammatical utterances without being able to explicitly describe the rules of grammar that they violate. This phenomenon has been paralleled in laboratory studies where subjects memorized a number of strings or sequences of letters that had been generated by the rules of an arbitrary "synthetic grammar." Following the memorization of several letter strings generated by a particular grammar, they were able to recognize other letter strings as conforming or not conforming to that grammar, but showed little success at describing explicitly the rules they were using implicitly (Brooks, 1978; Reber & Allen, 1978).

This linguistic phenomenon is of particular relevance to the social learning process described previously. In both language acquisition and socialization the observer is exposed to a number of exemplars of the application of a set of implicit rules and is then faced with the decision as to whether a test situation can be considered correct by those rules. The members of a culture often must learn the do's and dont's that govern the rules of acceptable conduct through such an observation process. A recent development in anthropology has been the concept of "culture grammar," consisting of "rules for the arrangments that should account for all combinations produced by the users of a

culture," including language, problem solving, and ritual systems (Colby, 1975, 914).

Conclusions

The conclusions that might be drawn from this analysis are that academics, incidentally to their professional training and early work experience, undergo a socialization process whereby they acquire an academic culture from mentors and more senior colleagues. This culture contains a number of implicit rules that will govern their perception of what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior in an academic setting ("academic dogma" or "theory-in-use"), which will tend to influence their behavior in ways of which they may be largely unaware. The culture also contains explicitly stated rules open to conscious scrutiny ("academic rhetoric" or "espoused theory") which may or may not coincide with the implicit rules that actually affect behavior.

Because the academic dogma that effectively governs behavior is learned through imitation by younger academics of older ones, and because it tends to be inaccessible to conscious scrutiny, it will resist change even though the behavior it fosters may become inappropriate to changed conditions. The academic rhetoric, being conscious, will be more amenable to change in response to current social pressures. This will cause it to diverge from the academic dogma, which will tend to be more in line with earlier formative conditions in the history of higher education.

Also, the academic dogma, not being conscious and hence not amenable to rational analysis, will show a propensity to inconsistency, leading to conflicting behavior.

There is a large element of conjecture in these conclusions, and there are large gaps in the analysis leading up to them. Some of the analysis on which it is based is little more than hypothetical, and even that which has a solider empirical base must be applied with caution to the higher education context; for instance, much of the experimentation on learning through imitation has been done with young children.

However, two practical implications should be given serious consideration. First, even if there are serious flaws in the conclusions presented, there seems little reason to doubt that the high proportion of studies in higher education employing self-report measures (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, interviews) may be sacrificing validity for economy and expedience. There are already compelling reasons for employing more behavioral measures in this sort of research, and the present paper can only add to the pressure.

Second, these conclusions suggest that some present-day patterns of behavior and motivations of faculty might be better understood as vestigial atavisms rather than as the rational responses to current conditions which they are virtually exclusively regarded as being today. The study of the history of higher education could be considered as a

potential source of testable hypotheses relevant to current problems, rather than as a largely academic exercise. Perhaps the epithet "guild mentality" should not be regarded merely as a figure of speech; a better understanding of why the University of Paris formed as a corporation of masters and apprentices might give us a better appreciation of the dynamics of credentialism today.

References

Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1974). Theory into practice: Increasing professional effectiveness. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bandura, A. (1962). Social learning through imitation. In M. R. Jones (Ed.), Nebraska symposium on motivation. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. & Walters, R. H. (1963). Social learning and personality development. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Blackburn, R. T. & Conrad, C. F. (1986). The new revisionists and the history of U.S. higher education. Higher Education, 15, 211-230.

Brooks, L. (1978). Nonanalytic concept formation and memory for instances. In E. Rosch & B. B. Lloyd (Eds.), Cognition and categorization. Hillsdale, N. J.: Erlbaum Associates.

Colby, B. H. (1975). Culture grammar. Science, 187, No. 4180, 913-919.

Foote, C., Meyer, H., & Associates. (1968). The culture of the university: Governance and education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kerr, C. (1982). The uses of the university. (3rd ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Mayhew, L. B. (1986). "WHY." History of Higher Education Newsletter, 7, 2-4.

Mazur, J. E. (1986). Learning and behavior. Englewood-Cliffs, . J.: Prentice-Hall.

Nisbett, R. (1971). The degradation of the academic dogma: The university in America, 1945-1970. New York: Basic Books.

Nisbett, R. E. & Wilson, T. DeC. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. Psychological Review, 84, 231-259.

Pettigrew, A. M. (1979). On studying organizational cultures. Administrative Science Quarterly, 24, 570-581.

Querault, M. The role of the mentor in the career development of university faculty members and academic administrators. Paper presented at the Conference of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors, April, 1982, Indianapolis. (ERIC No.: ED 216614).

Reber, A. S. & Allen, R. (1978). Analogic and abstraction strategies in synthetic grammar learning: A functionalist interpretation. Cognition, 6, 189-221.

Reber, J. R. (1981). Mentor and colleague relationships in academia. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, November, 1981, Boston. (ERIC No: ED 215640).

Sproule, L., Weiner, S., & Wolf, D. (1978). Organizing an anarchy: Belief, bureaucracy, and politics in the National Institute of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wegener, C. (1978). Liberal education and the modern university. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.